



EST. 2004

THE STEAM ROOM

HAGGERSTON

presents

BEAUTY *of* BATIK STORIES

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Cover Design by
Keshia Wong

BATIK

Batik is a beautiful and traditional cloth dyeing craft with origins in Indonesia. Over the centuries, cross-cultural exchange has brought batik to countries such as Malaysia, Countries in Africa, China and India, where the artisanal practice has developed its own regional identity.



FRAN MEI LIEW

UK

My love for batik began at a very early age. I found myself captivated by its beautiful colours and mesmerized by the intricate patterns and floral shapes. As a little girl, I would often wear batiks and play around the house. I distinctly remember my grandmother telling me that her wish was to see me in batik on my wedding day. And so I did. On my big day with Tony, I brought my grandmother's wish to life.

Even when I moved to the UK in 2001, what I held so dear to me were my batiks as it gave me a sense of belonging and always brought back some of the fondest memories of home and my childhood.





SIAN ROSANNA DAVIES

Trinidad

I wrote my dissertation for my Architecture degree in 2009. Having both Singaporean and Malaysian heritage on my mums side, I decided to write it on the building of communities in Singapore and Malaysia, and the role architecture has played in both countries.

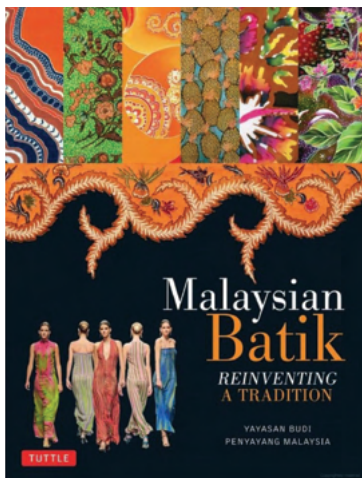
Since it was an architecture degree, our dissertations were required to have a certain level of aesthetic appeal and visual language in addition to the written content. All our dissertations had to be professionally bound. I asked my mum if she had any batiks she would be willing to part with so I could use it for this. This is the batik she sent me. I got a 1st for the dissertation and I LOVE how it turned out. I brought it for my next visit to Singapore so I could show off my work, then found out that this batik belonged to my Nenek. It was one of her favourites, everyone recognised it immediately and told me that this is now special for even more reasons than I realised.



SHU WEN TAN

London

Batik definitely reminds me of my craft and culture obsessed mother, who actively researches and wears batik for as long as I can remember. She's gathered intricate hand painted and stamped pieces from Indonesia and Malaysia, keeping them as they are, wearing them and finding out what their symbols and motifs mean to the region and craftsmen that design them. There are two close family friends who have influenced the batik world: the first a writer and editor who has recorded batik history and the next, designer Eddie Yap, who in my eyes, took Malaysian Batik to another level. I feel that it's down to my generation to carry the craft forwards and feel lucky to have had such influences around me. To me, batik is way more than a decorated piece of cloth and technique. I'd highly recommend reading *Malaysian Batik: Reinventing a Tradition* by Noor Azlina Yunus.



KIM RICHARDS

Bristol, England

My mother is from Penang, and my earliest memories were visiting the Batik factory and learning how to make the batik designs. I remember always being fascinated by the patterns on my Ah-Ma's sarong. When I got married in 2018, I wore a traditional sarong kebaya with a gorgeous batik skirt, beaded slippers and embroidered blouse. The colours were so vibrant, and I felt so proud to be wearing such a beautiful dress.



KUEN STEPHANIE

Let's Celebrate (2020)
40in x 28in

Malaysia

In this painting, you will see the men wearing batik shirts for a special occasion.

KUEN STEPHANIE

Kasut Manik / Manek Shoes
(2019) 30in x 26in

Malaysia

The Nyonya ladies still strongly uphold their tradition of wearing kebayas and sarongs with beautiful intricate design.





CÉLINE LOH

London

I wear Batik with pride, blending it into my personal style through the Batik items I've collected through the years. Wearing Batik is my way of honoring my family's Peranakan heritage and staying true to my roots. I recently found out I'm distantly related to Lim Nee Soon/Lin Yishùn the 'Pineapple King', as well as my great grandaunt Teo Soon Kim, Singapore's first female barrister! Needless to say I'm a very proud part of the diaspora and I hope to continue to spread this beautiful culture through the form of fashion.

SEPTEMBER KHU

Kuala Lumpur

It was my first time painting batik patterns, so as painting on a cast iron wok! A corporate company commissioned this art piece as a farewell gift. You might wonder, why a wok?

A wok as the medium was an unconventional choice. The team wanted it to be unforgettable. And also to remind of the rich Malaysian street food culture when the director returns to Europe and then using batik as another representation of our cultural identity.

On the other hand, I have a habit of collecting items that would make great gifts for friends outside Malaysia. One of them was this tiny piece of batik that was the size of a handkerchief I bought in Melaka.

I combined everything and produced this statement piece.





AKIKO KOIWA

Japan

I moved to Indonesia with my husband in 2002. Shortly after that, I saw a woman was drawing with canting at a local department.

I was so impressed and I really want to learn batik. But in no time my daughter was born in Jakarta. When she was 2 years old, I finally started to learn batik. 6 months later we came back to Japan with a lot of canting, wax and dye.

Of course, I really enjoy drawing and dyeing batik in Japan.



WEI CHIEH SOON

London

It's hard to think of a specific batik story. It's just...there, a backdrop to our lives and so much a part of the Malaysian cultural identity that most of the time you don't even notice it. Right from the point we're born, we spend a big part of our life swaddled in batik. And I mean this quite literally - many babies (including me) were put down for a nap in a batik sarong suspended from the ceiling with a heavy duty spring attached so any movement would cause the whole thing to bounce up and down and (hopefully) put the baby back to sleep. A motion-activated baby rocker.

My first conscious encounter with batik would have been in school, when we learnt about how batik is made. We were told to bring in a white candle, and use it to draw patterns on a piece of paper before then watercolouring over it. This is a very simplified, child-friendly way of showing how batik is made, but if you're going to do it here's a tip: don't be like my mum and use a birthday cake

candle; you want a proper heavy-duty, made for religious purposes (or a Malaysian blackout) candle. One which won't break the second you apply any pressure on it.

I also remember going on a school field trip to a batik factory. That was a brilliant experience watching first the patterns being drawn on with wax (no, they didn't use candles), or using blockprint with the wax before the fabric was then dyed, and washed to remove the wax. When taking this trip down memory lane I was pretty surprised to see that the factory is still there (<http://www.penangbatik.com.my>).

Now that I've moved to the UK, it seems like my journey with batik is over. The last time I wore batik was at my high school graduation dinner, where I was the only one in batik, and was teased mercilessly for looking like a dodgy middle-aged politician trying to look more "Malaysian" to appeal to the voters. I remember buying it from one of the dodgier parts of KOMTAR in Penang, the parts which barely see the light of day, where decades-old clothes shops rubbed shoulders with pirated VCD sellers. I wanted one with dragons on, but my mother nudged me towards a more neutral, abstract pattern. Probably the right choice, because the dragons would perhaps have suggested more wannabe triad gang leader rather than politician. I have to admit, I'm struggling to decide which would have been worse.

Sadly, many of my generational peers shared this stereotypical imagery of batik, which probably explains its decline in popularity. Fortunately, this seems to be changing, and maybe one day I will be rocking my grandchildren from a batik swing again.





Photographer: Carl Bigmore

PIA AND ZU DAWSON

London

Batik sarongs are what our grandmother Mak Eng wore around the house, with a baju kurung top and bare feet. Faded from washing and the hot sun, they make us think of the kampung, banana trees, innumerable aunties.

Mum wears her batik around the house too, with a fleece and over the top of her trousers. Warm in winter, cool in summer, she says, even though actually she's always cold.

We bring our batik everywhere, to picnics in Finsbury Park, to the beach. We give them as gifts. We wrap gifts in them when we run out of wrapping paper. We wrapped Raia and Amien in them when they were born. We wear them to sleep when we're on our periods. They are clothing, furniture, memory, womanhood, heirloom, towel, token, home.

LEANNE TAN

London

Batik was sort of everywhere when I was in Malaysia and I never thought much of it until in secondary school. I had an art teacher who was very passionate about art and she allowed us to try our hand at creating a batik piece. It was really hard but it made me appreciate the process and the unique pattern in our clothing.

Last year (2020) I was preparing to leave Malaysia to pursue my masters in the UK. I wanted a piece of home with me so my mother took me to Central Market to get a sarong. The saleslady recommended this flowy pants with batik print, saying the style is modern and popular. I like it so we immediately got it. I wore it for our halls Christmas party as I want to be festive and Malaysian haha! All my friends complimented how beautiful it is even those back home when I shared this photo on Instagram.

This batik meaningful to me as it's something that I can wear to display my culture. It's my first batik (besides my sarong) and reminds me of home.



JOSEPHINE NGIAM

London

My maternal grandmother was from Malacca, Malaysia. She died when I was little. I don't have much memory of her but I will always remember her with her signature batik sarong. As a child, I nicknamed her 'Sarong Popo' or grandma sarong. She didn't have much to pass down to my mother or me as heirlooms. My mother had a kebaya, a beautiful embroidered top with a matching batik sarong, made for me to wear at my wedding. I hope to one day pass this on to my daughter when she grows up.



YIRAN DUAN

London

I grew up in a textile family and indigo dyed clothing always be my daily outfits. I started sharing different traditional handcrafts textiles in the UK over a year ago. And I feel these crafts can talk and carrying the culture through time. There are a lot of Miao/Hmong ethnic minority in my hometown and they are the master of indigo batik work with their special copper blades and beeswax. During the lockdown in the UK, I picked up my copper blades and tried to make my first ever piece of Batik work. It was really relaxing and interesting to work with, and the making process connected me with home in this nostalgic time when I not able to back home for so long.

SHU HAN LEE

London

My fashionista older sister used to wear these long flowy batik trousers around the house - and I remember, as an awkward girl, looking up to Jie Jie's effortless style. Then she moved on - as did every teenage girl then - to trendy Levi's bootcuts. But I never did fall out of love with the beautiful patterns and colours of batik... I started collecting these beautiful lengths of batik from the fabric shops of Arab Street and beyond - for no reason really but to admire the craft that's gone into them. When I started Rempapa Spice Co., these batik fabrics became our tablecloth at our market stall, the inspiration behind the label designs on our jars, the fabric wrapper for our furoshiki gift bundles... Finally I had an excuse for all my batik! Customers would send us lovely stories and photos of their batik - some framed proudly in their living room. I love how it's travelled from a different part of the world, and from a seemingly random starting point in my childhood, to here and now in the UK.

HANNAH- NATALIE HOSANEE

Manchester

Whenever I see a batik pattern especially in featuring prominent a green colour I will always smile and think of my ah ma. My strongest memory of batik was of her wearing a batik sarong around our family home. It's something I always associate with being relaxed, comfortable and cool as she mostly worn a sarong at home, she'd wear slacks out and about with a kabaya blouse and return home from shopping to put on her sarong.

Over the years though I've grown expand my perception of batik I noticed that it's widespread wear it's a common pattern in Malaysia from my memories of my ah ma to the shop keepers I'd meet in our town and the people working on hawker stalls. Batik is something that crosses class and race, not matter is people are wealthy and privileged or seen to poor it's a pattern of fabric that crosses all those things.

The real beauty of batik for me is that its accessible, everyone can own a piece from the mass produced printed fabrics to hand painted one off pieces it's all recognisable and synonymous with Malaysian culture.

Batik is intertwined to every part of Little Yellow Rice Co, we use it as the background in our imagery, we use batik sarongs I brought back with me from Penang and KL at our supper clubs cut for use as table clothes. When their all laid out and I look around at the settings it feels comfortable, it sets the atmosphere for our evening and it's a little piece of my ah ma house with how I felt during my times in Malaysian - just from having the patterned fabric around me.



TRACY GOH

San Francisco, California

My first contact with batik was when I was an infant, being rocked (or rather bounced) to sleep in a spring loaded baby hammock made with my mother's batik sarong. A cherished piece of batik keepsake is a quilt blanket or 百家被. Literally translates to "a hundred-household blanket", when a child is 100 days old, their elders visit multiple households to ask for their blessing by donating small pieces of fabric. The fabrics are then stitched into a quilt blanket for the child as a symbol of good health and protection. Kai Poh, my mother's then eighty-year-old godmother made such quilt blankets for me and my two siblings, entirely by hand stitching. I remember putting myself to sleep marveling over each colourful square and running my fingers over the stitches, the batik squares were my favourites. Now as a Malaysian food purveyor in the United States, batik is often featured with my food as a way to express and connect with my identity.



XUAN LIM

London

I grew up in Malaysia, where my dad, mum and grandmother (my ah ma) would wear batik sarongs around the house. I remember my dad sitting with one leg over his knee to create a little sarong hammock where he would bounce me on it like a little trampoline! Just thinking of it brings back fond memories of the giggles and laughter... it's one of my earliest memories as a child and it always makes me feel so loved.

WEN YI LIM

London

SAY, SAYANG

I'm eight and having the greatest time playing in Grandma's backyard, a gray terraced house in the outskirts of Penang, which means that when it's time to leave for home in Kuala Lumpur I cannot think of anything else but to belt my arms to her waist, my face buried in the folds of her batik sarong; the late evening light bouncing off the vivid blue, gold, and reds of her skirt and bleeding into the edges of my scrunched-up eyes. That's my first enduring memory of batik: a firework burst of flora and leaves across navy cloth, each petal carefully defined by a series of gold and white dots, like the beginning of stars in a darkened sky.

I'm eighteen and off to college in America, which means being fluent in timezones and getting really good at building a whole new life out of flat-packed furniture. For my birthday Grandma sends me a batik skirt brimming with purples and reds, an intricate braid of fan-shaped flowers and feathery leaf blades weaving its way across the front fold. "Happy birthday, sayang" she says over the phone, and I try not to let my voice betray the growing wetness behind my eyes.

I'm twenty-eight and starving for some semblance of home in the midst of London's raging pandemic. I do a closet clear-out in an attempt to take my mind off things when I come across a neat fold of cloth wedged between some old t-shirts and a denim skirt that has definitely seen better days. I loosen it free and find a batik skirt unfolding into my lap, a tactile reminder of another place where palm trees grow tall and easy, where roads are marked in three languages, where the towers are twinned — and my heart stirs, skips a beat, like this.





SOPHIE KHO

London

My earliest memories of batik was to watch my mother bundle laundry in it to bring to the dobi (what we called a laundromat where I grew up) and on sarungs worn by my maternal grandmother. So entwined it was in my childhood growing up in Malaysia that “making batik” was part of school arts and crafts activities, I still remember the fascination from patterns I could create with colour and play of wax.

It was only when I grew older that I understood my descent from the Peranakan subculture through my mother’s line, and how batik use was a strong representation of that. My most treasured piece of batik is a dressing gown hand made and painted from my mother’s village in Kelantan. Vintage, discovered by family in pristine condition, its cerulean blue and still heron wings remind me that where ever I “wade” on life’s journey, a piece of me will always be grounded to home.



CATHERINE CHONG

Cornwall

My mom’s mom is a 5th generation Nyonya in South East Asia. The family is dotted around Singapore and Malaysia.

I spent many of my school holidays staying with grandma. At first, it was because, unlike my other relatives, she doesn’t tease me about being an outsider, that I was adopted and only spoke Tamil. Spending time with her meant cooking and baking all day or hang out with her friends, most of them Nyonya.

These are ladies who are immaculately dressed in hand embroidered and sewn Nyonya blouse and Batik sarong all day - from grating coconut to make coconut milk every morning, baking trays of amazing Nyonya Kueh, to grilling Otak Otak - not needing to put on an apron or wear an old t-shirt like me. I don’t know how they do it!

I left home right after graduating from secondary school. This photo was taken when mom told grandma that I have been proposed to (a marriage proposal I rejected eventually). 10 years ago. Grandma did tease me about my blouse. She said factory made lah. That was the last time I saw grandma. She left me a set of her blouse and Batik sarong.



ANNA SULAN MASING

@annasulan

There is a rhythm to wearing my batik sarongs. In Malaysia it is what I change into after my evening shower, before dinner and after a beer on the verandah. If I am hanging out at home, I might wear one during the day. Once, we were up river and dad suggested didn't we pop down to get something from the shop, so I just got in the car in my lounging sarong - then he changed plans and went to meet some people and I walking around town meeting new people. I was not cool about this! I was in a t-shirt sans bra, my flip slops, and sarong, basically my pjs. Of course many people wear sarongs as everyday clothing so it wasn't an issue - but I knew I had napped in this!

In the UK I live in my sarong in summer, it is the only thing to wear at home. I am also a big fan of pyjamas as daywear (at home!) so it fits into that vibe.

We also have a 'formal' sarong that you wear with your kebaya (an embroidered blouse), this is usually a fitted long batik skirt; I don't have one! But, every time I go home I buy a new sarong, so I think next trip I need to get one to go with my kebaya as I have enough regular sarongs.

Last year I wrote about my sarongs. Sarongs were a feature in my PhD.

<http://asm-talkingaboutfood.blogspot.com/2020/04/sarongs-food-home-mothers.html>

A version of this was published in Nina Mingya's zine Stay Home Diaries

<https://bittermelon.weebly.com/stay-home-diary>



JONAH & COCO

(Anna Sulan's dog and cat)

The art of not getting trouble for being the sofa is to sit on the carefully placed sarong.

"I am very good at sitting on it" - Coco

"I need reminding" - Jonah

Here is us on the sofa sarong, and with mum and her green & white sarong.

JIAN

@naked.asian.grocer

Neatly tucked and wrapped around her waist as you would a towel after a shower, the batik sarung is her choice of outfit as she goes about her day around the house. Her face is painted white with bedak sejuk, a paste made from fermented rice that improves complexion; her short hair freshly permed. She would ask "Chiak ah boey?" (Have you eaten?) before piling a bowl of food she cooked, regardless of what your answer was. This is how I remember my Ah Ma.

I flew home to Penang when I received a distress call from my cousin. I rushed to the hospital to see her. My uncles, aunts and my mum had taken turns to stay with her at night. They all look exhausted. So I offered to take the night shift. Her stroke had taken a turn for the worst. Her beautiful batik sarung is no longer around her but instead, is used to line her bed to comfort her. She was afraid. I can see it in her eyes. I held her hand to sleep, only to be jolted awake by her shouts for me "Jian ah! Jian ah!" when my hand slipped from hers. I had to calm her down before she fell asleep again. This is how I remember my Ah Ma.

It was the morning after her funeral. The majority of my family were sitting outside on the patio, talking and having tea. My mum patted my leg softly and nudged towards my grandma's room. I followed her. She opened her drawer and quietly pulled out my grandma's batik. A beautiful golden motive, flanked with dark green and maroon florals "This was her favourite," mum said. "Take it home with you" And so I did. This is how I remember my Ah Ma.





AUDREY KHEW

My mum was 24 years old and had just started her second job in the civil service. She moved from working in Customs to Immigration. She was still living at home and had a lot of disposable income that she mainly spent on clothes. She would go to Mun Loong, a textile emporium and take her time marvelling at the rolls of fabric and sending these to her tailor who would turn them into beautiful dresses and suiting.

She remembers buying this beautiful batik and having it tailored into this outfit here. It's her own design, a boxy vest paired with a sarong inspired skirt with a pleat detail. This photo was taken by dad in January 1967. It was not long after my parents had met.

When my older sister was born, batik was used in a completely different way. She slept in a makeshift hammock made from a batik sarong that hung from the ceiling in a room above my Ah Koo (Uncle in Teochew)'s shop. It would lull her and many other babies of that generation to sleep.

I grew up seeing my mum wear a batik sarong at home with a tee. If she took a nap, the tee would come off and she'd lie there with the sarong (sewn together so it's like a bottomless sack) covering her like a blanket. And it would be perfect. Roomy and airy, it's cooling against the tropical heat and it covered her modesty.

Batik is everywhere. It literally is the fabric of life if you grew up in Malaysia.

MANDY YIN

@sambalshiok

Batik was always in the background whilst growing up in Malaysia. Every Malaysian will have a love and fondness for it, through years of subliminal exposure to it.

Most often my parents would wear long cloths of batik as sarongs at home, as the fabric was attractive and also cool in the thick humidity. For special occasions, my mum would wear a batik baju kebaya (Malay/Peranakan traditional dress as pictured) and my dad still to this day proudly wears many shirts in batik print whenever we go out for birthdays or other celebrations. When we'd go round to relatives' for meals, batik would frequently make an appearance as a tablecloth.

The batik prints found in Malaysia are vibrant and colourful, and come in an endless variety of harmonious prints. Much like the peoples who make up its population.

Seeing batik always gives me a sense of joyful nostalgia now, having lived in London for the majority of my life.





JULIE LIN

@julielincooks

My gran to this day still makes all of her own clothes from batik fabrics. Her pillow cases for her chairs are all batik too. She lives in a traditional Baba Nyonya house with the signature beautiful tiles. I love seeing all the pattern contrasts and colours every time I go!

GUAN CHUA

@guan_chua

Here is a snap of me (@guan_chua) with my dear friends & fellow chefs Mandy (@sambalshiok) & Lap (@oishinboy) from our 2020 Chinese New Year Pop-up collaboration, donned in Batik aprons & Malaysian colours! Batik has played a key part at my Nyonya Supper Club and Pop-up dining events over the years. Spare batik sarongs from my family home in Malaysia have been repurposed to become table runners, table cloths & aprons that have featured at our events, complementing the food on offer and giving diners & guests a more immersive experience.



BAN LING WONG

Batik (at least in Asia) is the quintessence of Sarongs - very much of a staple garment that often goes through a life course from festive garment to washrag. It is often said that the Batik Sarong is the women's sarong.

This lovely heritage textile evokes memories of my mother's small collection, neatly stashed in a camphor chest. I remember the pleasant fragrance of wax and resin whenever she opened the chest to select a good quality batik cloth of closely woven crisp poplin) to have them sewn into a sarong to pair with a gaily embroidered muslin Kebaya top to wear on special occasions in Peranakan tradition.

I remember having afternoon naps in a batik sarong cradle. My daughter also has vivid memories of having naps in a hammock-like cotton cradle from a strong spring hung from the ceiling...incredibly cool and comforting.

My mother used to clad an old sarong as a form of bathing gear, tying the top of her sarong at chest level into a firm knot, faintly reminiscent of Gauguin's pareo wrapped Tahitian women.

Batik sarong motives inspired by nature of flora and fauna, incorporating geometric designs had always fascinated me as a child. It also brought on an early awareness of how multifunctional a batik sarong is - a splendid dress up or practical dress down attire, a colourful table cloth, a shroud to shade the head, a Muslim burial cloth or a traditional baby sling.

Batik lovers will always appreciate flamboyant and intricate traditional designs and the charm and subtlety of modern updates. Batik whether hand drawn, block print, vibrant or subtle, vintage or modern remains a splendid iconic Malaysian craft that unifies a multi cultural heritage.



Photo of my daughter Keshia Wong in a Batik play dress made by her grand aunt



SHUEN- LI SPIRIT

Coming from a generation of mothers who neither saw their great grandmothers nor knew where they were buried during the Japanese Occupation, I am moved by the greatness of the human spirit to forgive. It is not for nothing that Batik is a very sensitive topic for me. Yet, Batik is an Art worth sharing, from my Peranakan Chinese-Malay-Indonesian roots. It is an Art that has brought differences together, and personally, a reconciliation to the lack of family history, which can never be retrieved from my mother and grandmother. Today, I find peace through my Batik practices and joy in my Dutch classes. With my supportive partner and loving feline muse, I get to do what my family could not in a foreign land - inspire others with the intricacies of Batik-making and share the stories that Batik art in itself is never complete without.



PROJECT CROWD SOURCED BY JENNY LAU

FEATURING

FRAN MEI LIEW
SIAN ROSANNA DAVIES
KIM RICHARDS
SHU WEN TAN
KUEN STEPHANIE
CÉLINE LOH
SEPTEMBER KHU
AKIKO KOIWA
WEI CHIEH SOON
PIA AND ZU
LEANNE TAN
JOSEPHINE NGIAM
YIRAN DUAN
SHU HAN LEE
HANNA-NATALIE HOSANE

TRACY GOH
XUAN LIM
WEN YI LIM
SOPHIE KHO
CATHERINE CHONG
ANNA SULAN MASING
JIAN
AUDREY KHEW
MANDY YIN
JULIE LIN
GUAN CHUA
BAN LIN WONG
SHUEN-LI SPIRIT

